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4-2010

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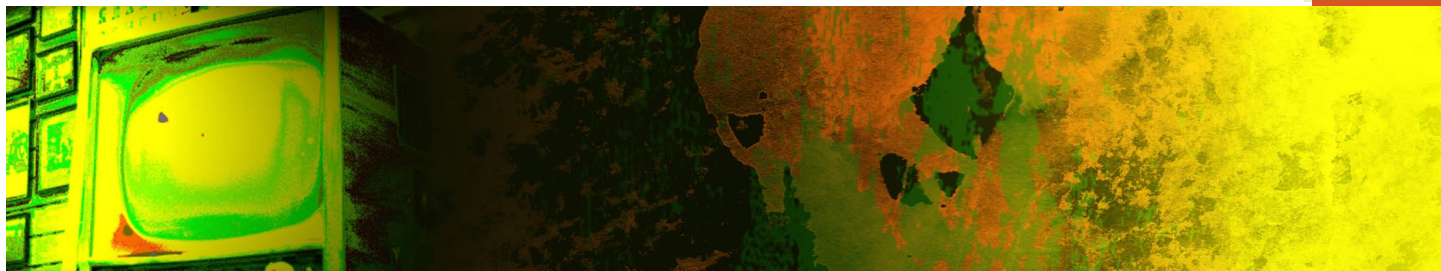
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Recommended Citation

Cohen, James N. MA and Gershon, Peter R., "Teaching Television Production in the Age of YouTube" (2010). *Faculty Works: Digital Humanities & New Media*. 2.
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TEACHING TELEVISION PRODUCTION IN THE AGE OF YOUTUBE

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we offer an examination of why traditional television production pedagogy remains cogent into the second decade of the 21st century. The shift to smaller distribution platforms and the democratization of television distribution through YouTube will cause production teachers to shift emphases in their overall approach. Our thesis is that regardless of the delivery device, composition, the grammar of television and story structure still matter.

Teachers of the art and craft of television production routinely deal with a paradox; specifically, prepping their students for the future while adhering to their own educational and professional training that is often deeply rooted in the past. For decades, educators updated knowledge and upgraded skill levels by attending conferences and symposia, doing their own production work, and/or periodically re-immersing themselves in professional environments. New production technologies, practices and workflows have continually evolved but with some effort,

teachers have always been able to keep their knowledge and skill bases current. Keeping pace with hardware has been a different tale. While industry trade shows have always tantalized attendees with the newest and coolest of technologies, collegiate budget lines have historically been guided by many things other than the need to be on the cutting edge. This has not helped colleges keep pace with ever-escalating changes in technology and equipment. As a result, teaching at the collegiate level has historically meant working in under-resourced facilities, with equipment and technologies just slightly behind those used in the professional world. Despite constant technological changes, however, it could be argued that the basic television production pedagogy learned in the last decades of the 20th century has remained relatively unchanged, viable and applicable well into the first decade of the 21st.

As we enter the digital age, television production processes and workflows have undergone a shift of tectonic proportions, and that raises questions about the methodology and information necessary to now teach it. Optimistically, television production can still be taught the same it has always been, with updated information regarding digital production and distribution

technologies, as well as mobile and social-media distribution outlets. But in order to succeed in the digital world enveloping them, educators will likely have to make some changes in how they approach teaching. And that will include understanding how the cultural terrain has changed for television production students, as well.

THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE

In 2005, the founders of [YouTube](#) opened their site to the world and created a so-called “democratic” distribution outlet for video; within several months, over one million videos were shared with the world (“YouTube serves up 100 million videos a day online,” 2006). YouTube has had a profound effect on popular culture and created a new model for video distribution. For the first time, anyone, regardless of knowledge and training, can get their work seen by many other people. This includes student work, which can now be displayed online without any previous academic training. Prior to the YouTube era, television students with a desire to distribute their own content had to expend intense effort and go through numerous barriers to get their work on the air. Without persistence and a connection to local outlets, students faced huge hurdles when they attempted to share their work and productions. This is no longer the case. According to a 2007 Pew Internet Research study, 64% of teenagers have participated in some sort of online content creation activity (A. Lenhart, *Teens and Social Media*, December 19, 2007). Along with the accessibility of easy distribution, however, has come a wave of apparently self-taught students. In the new digital world order, the availability and ease of use associated with technologies like desktop editors, inexpensive cameras and online distribution have convinced some students that they can become successful producers and create television without experiencing curricular instruction. Students who believe that a high number of YouTube ‘hits and views’ is the equivalent of professional validation for their work can

be forgiven for approaching their college level academic television experience with a less-than-respectful attitude. To students who already have had several thousand “hits” on their YouTube video, what can television instructors offer that they haven’t already achieved?

While there certainly has already been a considerable amount written on dealing with millennial students in the classroom, dealing with the effect an entrenched ‘vox populi’ distributive platform like YouTube has had on television students requires an understanding of how much YouTube has blurred the lines between professional and amateur quality. Pedagogically, the solution may lie in helping students understand the differences between video and television, and teaching them to differentiate between quantity and quality. Learning formal television production and time management skills are both long-standing components of college level television production courses. Courses that take the student through facilities training on broadcast switchers, studio cameras, audio boards, and graphic and tape systems produce students who are aware of the technology that creates television, as well students with the confidence to use that technology creatively. A “traditional” broadcast production course can teach the more advanced level aspects of television production while maintaining a focus on both team collaboration and individual aptitude. For teachers, understanding the need for maintaining, and updating a formal pedagogic approach is important.

CHANGES IN PEDAGOGIC PHILOSOPHY

Current television production pedagogy might be traced and understood through philosopher Walter Benjamin’s insight into audience behavior and motivation. Benjamin pondered the mindset of film audiences in the 1930’s, well before the advent of broadcast television. Writing about how film audiences of that era ignored the technology of filmmaking when watching a

film, he postulated that the experience of watching a film was oddly against the human nature of questioning one's surroundings. Using the most easily understood comparison of the time – live theater – Benjamin said that the film audience would experience the reality of the stage through the artifice of a projection screen and this was successful because of the audience's detachment from the technology (Benjamin, 1936).

Conversely, the new generation of television viewers cannot be detached from the technology. Regardless of viewer passivity or platform (i.e., computer, cell phone or iPod), viewers have to utilize the gear when they watch television. An experience in which the technology is part and parcel of the viewing experience creates the need for pedagogy that deals head-on with that technology usage and deals with the aesthetics of the medium itself.

Television inherited a presentational style derived from earlier visual forms, starting with portraiture art, through still photography, and more recently through motion pictures (Gershon, 1991). Many of these aesthetic guidelines were formalized by Herbert Zettl in his seminal text *Sight, Sound and Motion* and are virtually universally accepted as the foundation of formal television pedagogy. The rules he set forth were developed with the audience and viewer in mind, partly to mask or hide the technological forethought in the audiences' mind. Zettl's rules govern lighting for depth, aesthetics of formal composition (the rule of thirds), audio acquisition and most importantly, framing for the story (Zettl, 2010). All of this has been and should continue to be taught to students in the hope they too will be able to produce a believable reality behind the screen, a story that actually exists inside the artifice of technology. These rules are the foundation of production pedagogy structure and they have lasted for more than five decades, proving their value to producers and audiences alike.

In 1981, MTV caused a small tremor in this foundation. In addition to driving television

audio into a long overdue series of technological improvements, the music videos which initially comprised the bulk of MTV's early programming created an

altogether new syntax of their own (Gershon, 1991). Music videos wrought a broadcast television aesthetic that has become more liberal and undefined. As television was distributed onto larger screens, the experimentation of style became commonplace. In the two decades following the launch of MTV, the style of television presentation changed, and changed audiences. MTV's avant-garde styles of framing and cutting actually changed the way we look at television and consequently changed television production itself, in a cycle where experimentation lead to enjoyment which lead to more experimentation. The liberalization of long standing aesthetic rules was only intensified in early 2005 "when YouTube solidified its slot as a home for the vernacular avant-garde" (Heffernan, 2009). While the stylistic changes which MTV wrought first on the world of television advertising may have initially come from pop culture and not from the Academy (Gershon, 1991), almost thirty years later, these changes have now become commonplace in virtually all television forms, perhaps as a consequence of broadcast and cable television industries playing to the audience's needs.

YOUTUBE AND THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

When the first videos were uploaded to YouTube, professional content creators realized that YouTube had not only created an easily accessed platform for amateurs, but had also created one with the potential for vastly increased viewership for the public at large. As major companies such as Disney and Viacom began to re-purpose some of their material for the smaller screen, digital video applications increased. Digital technology and the Internet swiftly placed YouTube on the cultural landscape, and to production educators it must have seen odd at first: in the midst of an

era touting television viewing on ever-larger screens, the sudden creation of a digital, Lilliputian-like parallel universe where everything formerly gargantuan now became minute. In a flash, analog was finished. As one professor playfully noted, if there was any doubt that the analog era was over, in early 2009 it likely vanished for good, when, on February 15th, after 20 years of broadcasting in the 4 X 3 aspect ratio, *The Simpsons* was broadcast in 16 X 9 (Fink, 2009).

Henry Jenkins, author of *Convergent Culture*, states that media evolves, and delivery technologies die and become replaced (Jenkins, 2006). As each delivery technology such YouTube or iPod video becomes the best new distribution outlet, the content is carried on a variety of new digital carriers. As the ongoing hardware and software changes cycle through, what remains constant and paramount for educators is the training of our students. Because students now enter college with knowledge of Internet and mobile-based television, professors must become familiar with what their students know and take for granted. Understanding the concepts of newer delivery technologies allows television educators to be strong guides rather than mere facilitators of ideas. The bottom line, however, is that irrespective of distribution mode, composition, the grammar of television production and story telling structure still matter.

PEDAGOGY SOLUTIONS

Because of the cultural importance of television on small screen and Internet outlets, several aspects of these changes, including integrating multi-screen work into the curriculum, are very manageable. First and foremost, students need to be reminded that it is the story, not the destination, which is the star. Referencing multi-screen media, Simon Derry writes: “[new types of television] must work well delivering the full visual quality and emotional content the program enjoys on more traditional platforms” (Derry, 2006). To insure that the story is translated well,

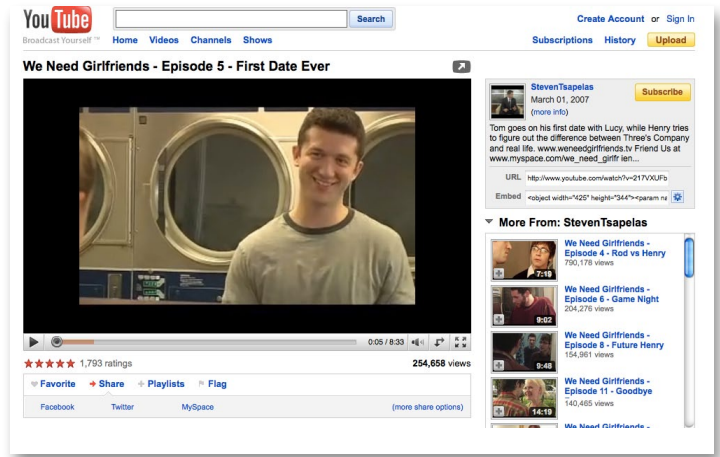


Figure 1. YouTube.com version of multi-screen viewing. <http://youtube.com>

students need to remember to think about the size of the screen on which the finished product will be displayed when producing (think: acquiring tighter shots) and distributing (think: Internet content is often displayed as a screen within a computer screen, see Figure 1) (Zettl, 2009).

In the new world of digital media, students need to also understand that there is more involved in moving to a smaller screen than merely reducing the size of the image. They should be aware that at present, all television is digitally compressed, just as they need to know that in order to distribute on smaller screens, compression is necessary to make the video file size smaller. Aesthetically, they also need to be conscious of what will be permanently lost in translation. When discussing the move to smaller screens, Zettl points out that, among other aesthetic difficulties, there can be a loss of credibility regarding original intent. Images initially acquired with a larger screen in mind - during what he calls the “native acquisition” - are not designed for the small screen; the result can be a story that seems “fake” when displayed on those small screens. His summation is simple and to the point: “You cannot just squeeze stuff onto a small screen” (Zettl 2009).

Another critical point is the increased importance of incorporating depth in framing. The lack of depth in the two dimensional screen has



Figure 2. Note the utilization of the z-axis and depth. Frame still from “We Need Girlfriends” episode 5 (Tsapelas, 2006).

always been problematic, but on tiny portable screens the issue becomes significant. Utilizing the Z-axis in shots dramatically increases the quality of programming. Successful shows exclusive to the web, such as “We Need Girlfriends” (see Figures 2 and 3) and “Dr. Horrible’s Sing-a-long Blog” (see Figure 4) incorporated classic film production technique to create the illusion of depth in their web shows. When trying to create a reality on the other side of the screen, the depth of the frame increases the desire to watch a program. Zettl has stressed the need for the use of Z-axis space, saying that the depth of the scene is what keeps the audience’s eyes peering directly into the screen and particularly so on tiny screens.

Perhaps the most important aspect of small screen work is the idea of aural cognitive reception. Editing for the audio story is crucial. In the words of editor Jay Ankeny, “ears don’t blink” (Ankeny, 2008). Zettl continually reminds us that small screen content can easily have an audio/visual energy imbalance. In an era in which television is as much listened to as watched, the emphasis on proper audio production is an absolute essential when teaching storytelling for multiple screen distribution (Zettl, 2009). Finally, in addition to understanding the aesthetic and technological differences between the different platforms, students need know how to use the



Figure 3. The following shot with reverse z-axis. Frame still from “We Need Girlfriends” episode 5 (Tsapelas, 2006).

compression “codecs” needed to get online and present their work on multiple screens. All of these are the keys to teaching them how to create content in this “new media world order.”

One possible comprehensive solution which allows students to engage the challenges of potential loss of screen credibility; the vastly increased importance of incorporating the Z axis and creating depth; and the increased importance of audio in the story telling process, is the creation of a platform that accommodates several distribution modes. At Hofstra University, television production majors culminate their studies in a required capstone production course in which they produce four biweekly editions of [For Your Island](#) (QuickTime Movie), a live, thirty minute magazine show (modeled after the CBS program Sunday Morning) about Long Island’s arts, culture and entertainment. Each show is created over a three week cycle during which students in the class first pitch the stories they wish to cover, and upon having their story approved, spend the next two weeks writing, interviewing, shooting and editing it. Their features are used in a live program using a studio set with hosts. There is a great deal of peer to peer learning but schedule and the discipline needed to hit target dates are the real “teachers” in the course.

A website was created in 2007 to display the completed shows online. The web site’s pro-



Figure 4. Note the usage of deep z-axis shooting through concentric circles. Frame still from “Dr. Horrible’s Sing-A-Long Blog” (Whedon, 2008).

vided the impetus for a web-targeted version of the air show, also to be produced by the class. During the web show’s first season, the students involved were given very little in the way of direction about developing parameters regarding topic selection, show length, feature style, music, or graphic design and usage, other than being encouraged to watch other web television programming as a source of inspiration. This was done with an eye towards letting the web show develop and evolve organically. Initially, the web show took its lead from its student producers; and the students who volunteered for this position were already viewing a lot of television on the web (see Figure 5).

Six seasons later, the show now has more defined parameters in all of those areas, as well as a standardized production schedule. Truthfully, the development process was not always smooth but its evolution is honestly that of a student-conceived and produced show. The web show is now an integral part of the overall capstone course experience.

Having gone through these cycles, the authors were again reminded that in many ways, the more things change, the more they stay the same: irrespective of platform and distribution mode, students remain comfortable with the technology they use to view television, but in many cases do




Figure 5. The current construct of the web show “Long Island Edge.” from “For Your Island” 2009. <http://foryourisland.com>

not seem as comfortable integrating the technology into production. As we continue the digital evolution/revolution, establishing an ongoing conversation about technology know-how and expectations with the students early in their academic career seems like a good first step that can really improve how web television technology can be taught. Additionally, students in intensive production courses should understand why they are learning traditional and non-traditional modes of production. In the best outcome, students exiting such a course should find that correctly applying the technology creates a stronger storytelling aspect to their styles. By making knowledge of technology the background to their experience, the students can move forward in their storytelling and production efforts.

In many ways, these changes harken back to the way television was originally produced: with strong content produced displayed on small glowing screens. Today’s portable devices with even smaller screens will engender a television curriculum renaissance of sorts. Television is a rigorous medium that can and will be taught academically for as long as it continues to exist as television. As Amanda D. Lotz states in *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, “television is not just a simple technology or appliance – like a toaster – that has sat in our homes for more than

fifty years. It functions both as a technology and a tool for cultural storytelling” (Lotz, 2007). By acknowledging and adapting the emerging digi-

tal transition into the pedagogy, the student can continue to learn academically how to succeed in television production. 

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